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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [VT](#) [RU](#)

SUBJECT: ORTHODOX AND CATHOLICS PURSUE CULTURAL COOPERATION

Ref: a) 04 Vatican 3308; b) 04 Vatican 2671; c) 04 Vatican

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Summary  
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1. (SBU) Holy See officials have told us recently they are encouraged by "small signs" of progress in Orthodoxy.  
2. (SBU) Holy See Country Director for Russia Monsignor Julio Murat told us that he has seen an increasing openness on the part of some Orthodox to the Vatican in recent months on cultural issues. Official statements by some Orthodox authorities and Russian politicians remain cool to the Catholic Church, he said, but more and more often Vatican authorities were finding a welcoming reception at universities or cultural events to which they were invited. Murat said he took heart in these "small signs."

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Cardinal and Metropolitan Join Forces  
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3. (U) Recent events back Murat's observations. In December, Orthodox Metropolitan Filaret of Minsk (also President of the Theological Commission of the Orthodox Church) invited the President of the Pontifical Council for Culture (formally known as the Council for Non-Believers), Cardinal Paul Poupard, to present the keynote address at a conference on the importance of Christian values to Europe. A press statement from Poupard's Vatican office said the conference in Minsk was "the fruit of 25 years" of contacts between the two churchmen. Immediately before traveling to Belarus for the December conference, Cardinal Poupard inaugurated an exhibit in his office of two-dozen icons painted by Russian artists. One of the icons had been blessed by Russian Orthodox Patriarch Alexy II and given to Poupard for delivery to Pope John Paul II.

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Library Promotes Unity  
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4. (SBU) Cardinal Poupard and Metropolitan Filaret had also been together in Moscow in November 2004 for the inauguration of the Library of the Holy Spirit, an Orthodox-Catholic research center where scholars can work together to promote Christian thought. During that visit Poupard and Patriarch Alexy issued a communique expressing their agreement on the need for "collaboration between the churches in the cultural realm, especially in light of the secularization, indifference toward religion, and activities of new religious groups" in Europe. After returning to Rome, Poupard told Ambassador Nicholson that he had been impressed by the welcome he received in Moscow, and by the interest in Orthodox-Catholic cooperation he had seen on the part of ordinary Russians. He told the Ambassador he saw hope for advancement of Orthodox-Catholic relations via the cultural route, even if the road was rougher when it came to theological issues.

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Shared Values  
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5. (U) In an assessment of ecumenical relations during the January 18-25 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, the Vatican official responsible for Orthodox Church issues, Polish Jesuit Jozef Maj, said relations had "developed notably." He said the positions of Catholics and Orthodox

were almost convergent when it came to moral issues and social teaching, and that this commonality should lead to Christians having a greater impact on European society. Maj also noted educational collaboration between the two churches that includes scholarships for Orthodox priests to study at Vatican universities.

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Comment

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16. (SBU) The Vatican had high hopes for the effect that the Pope's return of the famed Kazan icon would have on OrthodoxCatholic relations (ref a). Instead, the reaction from Patriarch Alexy and some other Orthodox leaders fell well short of Holy See expectations. Nevertheless, the goodwill that that gesture, and other "small steps" in relations have generated may now be paying dividends, at least on the cultural level. The Orthodox and Catholic Churches' shared aversion to European secularism make them natural allies in combating what they both regard as a central threat to faith in Europe. American Archbishop John Foley, President of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, is now planning his own trip to Russia this spring to help maintain any new momentum in relations.

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